

UTPA archaeologist visits with Donna ISD students to inspire learning local history

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Local history became alive and more relevant to a group of fourth and fifth grade students at A.M. Ochoa Elementary School in Donna recently when they heard from Dr. Russell K. Skowronek, professor of history and anthropology at The University of Texas-Pan American and director of the University's CHAPS program.



Dr. Russell Skowronek, professor of history and anthropology at UTPA and director of the CHAPS program, shows fourth grade students at A.M. Ochoa Elementary School different types of pottery shards during a visit to their class Sept. 23.

CHAPS, which stands for Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools, is one of UTPA's latest community outreach programs designed specifically to develop curriculum for K-12th grade level students that not only encourages learning about the cultural history of the Rio Grande Valley region, but also incorporates learning within the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and math.

Emily Anderson, Donna ISD director of Elementary Science, and Raychel Quiroga, A.M. Ochoa Elementary School science teacher, planned an action-packed day Sept. 23 for the students by preparing four learning stations where students participated in hands-on activities. Both have participated in professional development training with CHAPS for the past year including curriculum and lesson plan development.

Experiential learning was the order of the day for students, who excavated, did a stratigraphy exercise, learned about the tools of archaeology, and used a compass for mapping. They were also able to touch actual ancient artifacts, some of which were more than 4,000 years old.

Skowronek, who spent the day with the students, also brought the CHAPS survey station equipment used for the mapping of archaeological sites so that the students could experience some of the technical aspects involved in archaeology out in the field.

Skowronek informed the students of their role as stewards of the past, challenging them to become protectors and keepers of local cultural history.

"Archaeology is not something that only happens in places like Egypt, Greece and Mexico. There is a rich history right here in this Valley that goes back at least 12,000 years," he told the students.

Visitors to HESTEC's Community Day Oct. 2 at the UTPA campus can experience similar CHAPS activities as well as hands-on experiences in geomorphology, GIS mapping and more. CHAPS will also be present at the Fourth Annual Rio Grande Delta International Archaeology Fair Oct. 9 at the Palo Alto Battlefield in Brownsville. Both events are free and open to the public.